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FM REO HILLAH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0696
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RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RUEHIHL/REO HILLAH 0750

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SUBJECT: SISTANI MOSQUE FRIDAY SERMON STRIKES ANTI-AMERICAN TONE

¶1. (SBU) Approximately 3500-4000 people attended the Friday afternoon sermon given by Sheikh Sayed Ahmed Al-Safi, generally regarded as a close associate and spokesman for Ayatollah Ali Sistani. Al-Safi's speech was covered by several national television outlets.

¶2. (SBU) Al-Safi told his audience that he did not want to talk about fuel and electricity shortages, but rather about the connection between the Coalition Forces and terrorism. He said, "Terrorism cannot be active without official cover." Safi noted that the American forces were supposed to protect Iraqi's borders with Turkey, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Jordan, but many foreign terrorists were still crossing the border, killing more and more, and introducing car bombs into the center of Iraqi cities. Where is the twenty-one billion USD supposedly allocated for security, Al-Safi rhetorically asked.

¶3. (SBU) During his speech, he gave several examples of how Coalition Forces cooperated with terrorists. An American check point stops a man and asks him to leave his car, al-Safi continued. A black hood is put over his head while they ask him questions. In a minute, the hood is removed and the Americans apologize. But when he drives away, he feels something is wrong - the Americans have turned his vehicle into a car bomb, Al-Safi melodramatically concluded. In another example, a man was stopped by the Americans, his suitcase was taken away, and when it was returned to him, he discovered that it had been stuffed full of explosives.

¶4. (SBU) Al-Safi referred to a recent VBIED attack in Al-Kufa in the vicinity of Muqtada al-Sadr's home, claiming that the Americans had ordered Iraqi police away from a checkpoint and replaced them, later letting a car bomb drive through and detonate, killing over sixty day laborers. The Americans are talking about civil war, but are aggravating the fighting between Shi'a and Sunni by dividing Baghdad into sectarian neighborhoods, he stated. Al-Safi concluded that the Baghdad Security Plan would surely fail because the terrorists are informed of when the Iraqi security forces intend to strike them.

¶5. (SBU) COMMENT: Al-Safi is close to Ayatollah Sistani, and this virulent speech is alarming. The content will be regarded as truth by many moderate Sistani followers, and it will likely be cited by members of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Council in Iraq politicians in Najaf. The speech may indicate Sistani is feeling increasingly pessimistic about a constructive role for Coalition Forces in resolving Baghdad's security problems. I END COMMENT

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